Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914-1920

Jared Davidson
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Modern state surveillance in Aotearoa was forged during World War One, seeking to monitor and control the population's political freedoms by infringing on their right to privacy. Censorship and surveillance are an ever-growing part of society, exemplified by the New Zealand State Intelligence Services and the 'Five Eyes' intelligence alliance. Now it has become a profitable corporate industry as well, with undisclosed "data harvesting" at the heart of social media and online ad-revenue.

Jared Davidson, a labour historian and an archivist at Archives New Zealand, has written a lucid and fascinating account of personal histories preserved, through state surveillance, within the national archives. *Dead Letters* is an in-depth history of the lives captured, initially by government intrusion through surveillance and arrest under the auspices of war, then by the record keeping processes of the state. This paradox is acknowledged by the author, writing in the postscript that "[...] the state has preserved their resistance far better than if the letters had been allowed to reach their intended destination" (p.243).

Government intelligence gathering and censorship in New Zealand began in 1845 during the Northern War with the Crown targeting Māori who were suspected of treason. However, it wasn't until almost seventy years later that a nationwide surveillance network was cobbled together at the onset of World War One. It commandeered a wide range of Government departments such as the Customs Office, Postal and Telegraph Office and Alien Registration Branch, to gather its information on the lives of New Zealanders.

Colonel Charles Gibbon was a British officer and veteran of the South African War, and was with the Intelligence Branch in India at the turn of the 20th Century. He arrived in New Zealand in 1914 having been appointed chief of general staff, and as the war broke out, chief censor. Under his watchful eye, government operations seemed to be less to do with the military fighting an enemy overseas and more to do with "a scheme of censorship used to silence those who had threatened the war effort, the political economy or the state itself" (p.24).

The surviving personal correspondence that was censored by the military is held at Archives New Zealand in the records of the 'Army Department', confiscated as it passed through the postal system and collected in a 'secret registry'. It records the lives of individuals marked as political subversives who were believed to be a threat to national democracy by wartime authorities.

Each of the nine chapters in *Dead Letters* are dedicated to one or two of the censored letters, which are reprinted in full, revealing staunch individuals fighting against persecution, repressive working-class conditions and the surveillance apparatus of the state, which utilised the police as an intelligence gathering taskforce. They each provide a window into their lives and paint a grubbier and more nuanced picture of New Zealand society, and resistance and struggle against growing poverty and conscription during the First World War.

Marie Weitzel's letter to her brother Hermann in Germany is a harrowing portrayal of the persecution and discrimination of Germans in New Zealand and the existing animosity towards other nationalities by many British settlers and their descendants, heightened by the tensions and patriotism of the war. German immigrants like Marie had fled their homeland and its suppression of labour unions and socialist organising amongst the working classes. Davidson fleshes out Marie's life in New Zealand as a German woman and committed socialist during wartime. Her mail was intercepted and the police closely monitored her activities, noting her as an "extremist, anti-government, disaffected, obstinate and dangerous" (p61).

A west coast fern, pressed between the folds, accompanied a forlorn love letter penned by Frank Burns to his sweetheart "Doll" (Mary Nugent, then living in Melbourne) in the closing months of the war in 1918. Posted from Ngākawau, a small settlement just north of Westport, this letter was composed under certain duress by a defaulter "gone bush" to escape the long arm of the state. The letter tells of how he has heard the heartbreaking news of her recent marriage juxtaposed with his unflinching views on conscription and how his experience "has made my heart hard and bitter against those mongrels of humanity" (p118). Any archivist who has spent time arranging and describing a series of correspondence will know the personal lives that can be threaded through the archive. Even the most prosaic institutional records can touch upon the lives of people, often unheard, their stories and voices appearing when least expected.

In writing the book as a history from below, and in framing these individuals' lives through the growing labour movement in New Zealand, *Dead Letters* documents working-class struggles and how the state viewed some of its own citizens as subversive outsiders or even as destructive elements to be jailed or deported. The past decade has seen a growing concern and focus on the power structures inherent in archives and their skewing to the hegemonic voices in society, best encapsulated recently by David Thomas, Simon Fowler and Valerie Johnson's *The Silence of the Archive* (2017). Jared Davidson has provided archivists with a striking example of shining a light on a hidden corner of the archive, allowing their stories of struggle and resistance to be heard.

Reviewed by Nick Wotton